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\* National Black Feminist Organization  
\* by phone, 23 January 1998

[Discussion of classes she's teaching. Degree in Family and Community Education, special program at Teacher's College in anthro, soc., and education]

K: The first question I had was about---

D: You can't ask me my age. I have to tell you that.

K: Okay, I usually don't---about your activism previous to the NBFO?

D: I wasn't active in anything before that. I'm not even sure how I found my way there. I can't remember. It's been so long, so I can't remember if I saw a flyer or if I talked with someone. I don't really remember now how I met the women involved in NBFO, but once I did I knew that that's where I needed to be.

K: Were you in New York at the time?

D: Yes. I was living in New York. I went to New York to work on a master's and this is probably about the time. Yeah, it is. It was about the time that I was working on my master's.

K: Do you remember what year that was?

D: Let's see. '73.

K: Okay, so you were involved right from the beginning then?

D: Yeah.

K: So do you remember the---were you one of the founders?

D: I don't know if I would be considered one of the founders because I'm not sure that we ever said, "We are the official founders," so I don't know that. Who have you spoken with so far?

K: I spoke with Eugenia Wilshire, Deborah Singeltary, Jane Galvin-Lewis, and Margaret Sloan.

D: God, you've gotta give me all their phone numbers! I want to talk to all of them. They were---well, I know were Margaret and Jane were definitely involved and Diane---what's Diane's name?

K: Lacey?

D: Yes. And Eleanor Holmes Norton.

K: I spoke with her also.

D: Okay, so they were definitely involved.

K: How long did you participate in the organization? From '73 to?

D: I don't really know. I'd say about a year or two? I don't really have a good sense of time. I'm trying to think of---I guess once I embraced what they stood for, whether I was actually participating or not, I was still a member. I was still part of it. It was still in my soul.

K: I see. So whether or not you actually went to meetings it was---

D: Yeah, it was still part of who I was.

K: And, let's see, what role do you remember playing in the organization? Do you remember any activities you participated in or committees you served on?

D: I don't. I meant to look. I had a folder that has information and I don't know where that is and I was going to look for it before I called you and I didn't get a chance to. I don't remember, specifically, that I held an office, but I do remember meetings and I do remember that we had a conference and I do remember being impressed with the women in the organization and how well they conducted themselves. I remember Diane, specifically. I remember sitting in a room and we were meeting with---well, I guess this must have been a conference or something. I can't really remember what it was, but we were sitting in a circle and we were talking about issues or something and people said their names. And Diane facilitating and she would--she remembered people's names and she'd say, "Now," she'd say, "Like, Sarah, you made this point. Now what do you think?" I mean, I was, like, so impressed that she could remember people's names and she didn't know them.

K: That seems to be a characteristic that people pick up on---how people carry themselves.

D: Well, I think it's a leadership tool and I was impressed to see that women could be leaders, too.

K: So how do you recall the organization being structured? Were there different officers or---

D: That's the part that's foggy to me. I'm sure that there was a steering committee and I'm sure I went to some steering committee meetings 'cause I think that's kind of how organizations were run in those days. But I don't really remember president, vice-president, those kinds of things.

K: So did certain people stand out to you as leaders of the organization?

D: Well, the people that you said, the ones that I said, were definitely leaders. Diane was definitely a leader, Jane was definitely a leader, Margaret was definitely a leader. And I think they would have been leaders whether or not they had been---they were more like charismatic leaders. Whether or not they had an official position, they still would have been leaders.

K: Okay. Do you remember if you belonged to any other organizations while you were in Combahee? Any other women's groups?

D: While I was in NBFO?

K: Right.

D: Well, I'm a member of a sorority. Is that what you mean?

K: Sure. Yeah.

D: Well, my sorority is Alpha Kappa Alpha. I pledged that sorority in undergraduate school, so I was a member although I wasn't active at that time.

K: So there wouldn't have been any overlap in activities you did?

D: No, no.

K: So what events stand out for you from your time with NBFO?

D: Well, the conference that I said, that we went to. Of course, I can't remember where it was now.

K: Do you remember if it was at a church?



D: No, I think that it was at some kind of community center, but I can't remember exactly where. I guess more than events, it's the people that stand out for me and how impressed that I was that these women had things together---seemed to have their lives together. And that what they were doing and what they were asking for made sense to me and, I thought, needed in the world.

K: And the things that they were asking for, had you thought of those things before and it just took someone else to articulate it or do you think you were coming into that awareness with the times?

D: I probably---I don't know that I had formulated the ideas, but I certainly embraced them. NBFO did not---what's the term? Change my mind or influence me in that I was out there thinking, "We should live in a patriarchal society" and then they kind of turned me around. It didn't happen like that. I certainly believed that women had every right to do whatever they wanted to do. I grew up with parents who said, "You can do what you want to do." I grew up with a father who said, "You can do what you need to do. I've got your back," that kind of situation. They never said, my father never said, "You can't do this 'cause you're a girl child." He never said that. I always felt I could do anything I wanted to do.

K: Did you have siblings?

D: I have an older sister.

K: Okay. Both girls. And what did you parents do?

D: My mother didn't work and my father worked for the government.

K: So how would you categorize your class background growing up?

D: We were probably poor and didn't know it. I probably didn't know. I think back in those days---I certainly believe that my parents gave me "middle class values". In quotes "middle class values" even though I don't necessarily think that we had the middle class money. But certainly it was never a question, would I go to college? It was just where will you go to college? So certainly I do believe that education was very important in my family. \*

K: Okay. That was a side-question I had. Do you recall any ideological disputes within the organization, like conversations you got into about using the word "feminist" or politics or anything like that?

D: I don't recall that. I do recall that there was some tension between---well, there was tension between us and some of the women---the white women's groups. And I can't remember exactly what the tension was about but there was some kind of tension. It could have been that NBFO thought that the other organizations were not so supportive of us. I believe that---and I don't know if this is something that I felt then or something that I read later---but that some women in the feminist movement, some white women were kind of just playing around with it and they necessarily embrace it because they had money and they could always go back to whatever lifestyle they wanted to. But for Black women, at least for us, it was real for us. We were fighting for rights that we thought we needed to fight. So that could have been a tension.

K: So do you recall what made you think that they were playing around with it? Were there certain actions that they took?

D: There must have been some conversations but I can't really remember what they were.

K: Do you remember any of the groups in particular?

D: No. I think we used to meet in the office of Ms. or something. I think they used to give us space or something, but I really don't remember specific groups.

K: And how do you think that---well, how do you think that NBFO was viewed by other organizations? And that's not only white feminist organizations, but Black organizations or government?

*Stopped here*

D: I don't know specifically about organizations, but I know that in the Black community it was not looked upon favorably. I know that many Black men were threatened by women, by Black women, who said they were feminists. The idea was that you couldn't be Black and be feminist, too. That somehow you were betraying Black men by saying that your rights were important, so I know that women got a lot of grief from men. I think it's interesting that---when I looked around the organization I saw a lot of women, Black women, who came into NBFO from the civil rights movement because they felt that they had been mistreated in the civil rights movement and were not allowed to take leadership positions and they were really mad and they kind of came in. I don't know that that's the reason they came into NBFO, but I know that seemed to be the sequence of things: that they had been involved in civil rights and then got involved in feminist rights. Well, I did just the opposite. I got involved in women's rights first and, then, kind of went into civil rights, so I got an Afro in 1978. Started writing "Power to the People" poems in 1978, which is so amusing to my friends because it's like I was a movement behind. So that's okay.

K: Do you recall any reactions from Black men or women, who you personally knew, who were reacting to your membership in the organization?

D: Well, I knew people were a little suspect; that they thought if you belonged to a feminist organization that were gay, that you were lesbian and they were a little suspect of that. And it just---some of the men that I dated just couldn't quite understand why I would want to belong to a feminist organization [because of lesbians or women's rights].

K: Do you recall any coalition work that the organization did or the organization having any allies?

D: I don't. I'm sure that we must have. I feel like I wasn't there.

K: No, it's difficult to remember.

D: I know I went to meetings and I guess I wasn't as involved in decision-making as I could have been, so I don't know. But also I think that I'm much more self-assured. I'm much more aggressive than I was then, so it has to do with where I was in my life, too. Now if this were starting up, I probably definitely would be in a leadership position. But then I was probably a little more quiet.

K: Do you feel like there was room made for you to participate actively?

D: Oh, absolutely. There was no doubt that we wanted to tap the skills that people had.

K: Were you aware of any other Black women's organizations that were active around the same time?

D: That dealt with feminist issues?

K: Yes.

D: No.

K: Had you heard of the Combahee River Collective.

D: No, I don't even know that now.

K: Okay, it's a group that spun off in Boston from NBFO.

D: Okay.



K: There was also Black Women Organized for Action, which was in the Bay Area. Do you recall if there were any adversaries to the organization? You mention people in the Black community who didn't look favorably.

D: I remember Ida Lewis who was the editor of---I can't even remember the newspaper now, but she wrote something that we didn't like and we went to her office and had a sit-in.

K: Okay. So you were there. Was it *Contact*? *Enclave*

D: I can't remember what the organization was, but I remember we didn't like her and she showed up somewhere with Nikki Giovanni. Then we all decided we didn't like Nikki Giovanni either.

K: In connection with or had she written something also?

D: I think she must have written something. And then there was---what's that woman who wrote---Marsha Wallace.

K: Michelle Wallace.

D: Michelle Wallace and her *Myth of the Superwoman. Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, which seemed to be putting down Black feminists. She wasn't exactly our favorite person either.

K: So, well, first the sit-in. Do you recall what happened---well, you said she wrote something that you didn't like, but do you recall what was---

D: I think she said something bad about us. I think that's what it was. She said something about our organization and we didn't like it, so we went to her office.

K: To confront her about it or was there a demand for a retraction?

D: I think both. Well, people knew her. People---I didn't know her, but people in the organization knew her, so I think it was that we wanted both. It's just amazing how that was so crucial then and now I can't even remember it.

K: Do you recall what the result was of that?

D: I don't think she was there. I don't think she was there when we got there. So I think we just stayed for a little while. I don't think she ever---I'm sure she never printed a retraction or anything.

K: And was there ever any interaction with Michelle Wallace?

D: I don't think the group directly interacted with her, but again, I'm sure individual members knew her. She was young, too. That was another thing. We were saying, "This young woman. What does she really know?" I think she was an undergraduate or something and we're saying, "She hasn't even lived yet and she hasn't even been involved in issue? How can she write these things?" So it was a kind of dis---angry with her, but then kind of dismissing her because she really didn't---we felt she didn't really know what she was talking about.

K: But you didn't know her personally?

D: No, I didn't know her.

K: Okay. That's one of the things I'm trying to figure out because she claims to be a founder of the organization.

D: Oh, no. Has anybody said she was a founder?

K: No.

D: No. She was not. Definitely not a founder. Definitely not. I don't even remember what she looked like. I don't remember her coming to any meetings. As I said, there really weren't founders. There was a steering committee and all the people you named, and me, were on the steering committee, but I don't really know, like, how it all evolved. I don't remember the first meeting or anything, but definitely she was not involved. Please print that. ✓

K: That's much more delicate than what Jane Galvin-Lewis said, so---[laughter].

D: Oh, yes, Jane.

K: So, overall, what do you think NBFO accomplished? Either personally or in a broader sense or both.

D: Well, for me, personally, it validated what I believed and that is that I don't have to choose between being Black and female. I can be both. I refuse to choose between either/or. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and they're doing bad things to Black people and I'm mad and I want to go and kick butt. And sometimes I wake up and they're doing bad things to women and I'm mad and I want to go and kick butt. So it validated what I believed to be true. I think it's important to have organizations that do that. So definitely it did that. I think for me, also, I mentioned that these women were role models for me. I had a lot of respect for them. They were the kind of woman that I probably am now. They were the kind of woman that, as I looked at them, the kind of woman that I wanted to be. Kind of outspoken, able to say what I believed and not be afraid. And I don't mean to say what I believe and put people down, but I have a right to my opinion. So I guess I can thank them for part of my evolution to the woman that I am now.

I guess politically we made the statement that Black women can advocate for their rights and it's okay. I think that we, as Black women did with the early feminist movement, I guess turn-of-the-century, before the turn-of-the century---that we said to the world that Black women want to be included in getting rights for all women. That you cannot exclude us. Sojourner Truth? "Ain't I a Woman"?

K: Yeah.

D: Yeah.

K: So you would trace the history of Black feminism even back to Sojourner Truth?

D: Absolutely.

K: Now you say that---well, you still consider yourself a member of it because the organization is a part of you, but did you leave the actual, physical organization or had it folded?

D: I can't really remember what happened, quite frankly. I don't know if I just stopped coming or---I know---I think some of the key people kind of moved away or we lost touch with them. I don't really know. I think that it happens sometimes that you come together and you do what you need to do and then you sometimes pass it on to the next wave of people and either they keep it going or they don't. I'm not really sure. I know that Margaret moved somewhere [Michigan]. I don't really remember what happened with Jane. I know Diane was around. Eugenia was around. I'm not really sure what happened. We kind of just grew apart, but I still have a great fondness for these women.

K: That seems to be the sentiment with everyone. So why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore?

D: I don't---the organization as it is doesn't exist anymore, but I think that we've taken part of it with us, so to a certain extent it does. I teach "Feminine/Masculine". I talk about the feminist movement. When I hear students say, "Oh, back in the '60s didn't women burn their bras?" I have to say, "No. I don't know any



woman that burned their bra? Do you know how expensive bras are?" I teach this, so it's still with me. I don't have any children. I'm hoping one day to have a daughter and I will teach her what I know about being a woman and being Black. So I think that while the organization itself doesn't exist, I think that we've given a great gift to women who've come after us by the women that we've become.

K: And are you currently in touch with any former members of the organization?

D: I'm not and that's why I'm saying you've gotta email me and give me all their emails or phone numbers or something. No, I would like to be and I guess before---I left New York four years ago and before I left I did talk with Diane and I was saying, you know, somebody needs to do this---I'm so glad you're doing this. I was saying, "Somebody needs to chronicle what happened." And I got busy and just didn't do it and moved here, so I'm glad that someone is doing it because I think it's important.

K: I can also send you---have you seen an article by Beverly Davis? Do you know who that is?

D: No.

K:[ description of article to get comments on article from her] The last question I had for you was if you had any personal documents like letters or diaries or photos?

D: That's what I was saying. I had a folder. I know I didn't have any photos. I have to look for it. I may have just tossed it. I can remember writing "NBFO" on it.

K: Is there anything you'd like to add?

D: I know that's the question I always ask people. I don't think that I can say anything that I haven't said other than I have a lot of respect for these women and even though I haven't seen them for a long time, they're my sisters. And I'd love for us to have a reunion. I think that would be great fun, so maybe once this book comes out we'll have a reunion wherever you are, you'll have your booksigning---this is a book right?

K: Well, it's for my dissertation first and a book next. [Discussion of other groups in project. Comments for book dust jacket---one person from each organization. Suggested Maya Angelou or Ruby Dee to do intro.]

D: I guess that the final word is that I'm happy to have participated in this organization and I hope that we have left---well, I believe that we have left a legacy for women who come after us.

[end of interview]